

The Digital Monsoon: Analyzing the CNN Effect and Media Symbiosis in Bangladesh's 2024 Revolution

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Source: K M Asad/AFP/Getty Images

Introduction

In 2024, Bangladesh witnessed a transformative political upheaval being known as the "Monsoon Revolution," a movement primarily driven by university students demanding significant reforms in the country's quota system for government job recruitment. Initially focused on addressing what was perceived as an unfair allocation of jobs to descendants of freedom fighters, the protests rapidly evolved into a broader anti-government movement. This shift was catalyzed by the government's violent crackdown on protestors, which included internet blackouts and severe

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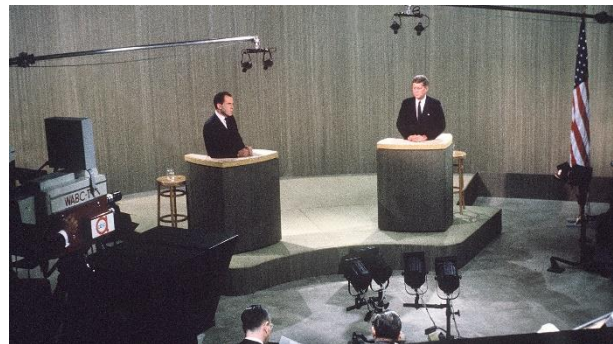
restrictions on civil liberties. The protests culminated in the resignation of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, marking the end of her 15-year tenure.

Central to this revolution was the role of media, both traditional and digital, in shaping public perception and influencing political outcomes. The CNN effect—a phenomenon where global media coverage influences policy decisions and public opinion—played a significant role in amplifying the voices of protestors and drawing international attention to their cause. Simultaneously, media symbiosis, the interplay between traditional news outlets and social media platforms, facilitated rapid information dissemination and mobilization efforts.

This commentary aims to explore how these media dynamics impacted the 2024 revolution in Bangladesh. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following research question: How did the CNN effect and media symbiosis influence the trajectory of Bangladesh's 2024 revolution? By analyzing these factors, this study will provide insights into the broader implications for media's role in political movements within Bangladesh and similar contexts globally.

Background

The influence of media on political movements has evolved significantly over the decades. Historically, newspapers were the primary medium through which political information was disseminated, shaping public opinion and political attitudes. As technology advanced, radio and television became pivotal in influencing political campaigns and elections, with television notably impacting the 1960 U.S. presidential debate between Kennedy and Nixon.² In recent years, social media has emerged as a powerful tool, providing instant access to information and enabling rapid dissemination of political messages. This shift has allowed individuals to engage with political content more interactively, shaping their beliefs and actions based on diverse perspectives encountered online.



² Allen, Steve, and Robert J. Thompson. "Television in the United States | History & Shows." Encyclopedia Britannica, September 13, 2024. <https://www.britannica.com/art/television-in-the-United-States/The-Kennedy-Nixon-debates>.

In Bangladesh, the political climate leading up to 2024 was marked by increasing dissatisfaction with the ruling Awami League (AL) government, led by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. The AL had been in power for over fifteen years, during which time it faced accusations of authoritarianism, corruption, and undermining democratic processes.³ The government's controversial job quota system, which reserved a significant portion of public sector jobs for descendants of the 1971 liberation war veterans, became a flashpoint for discontent. University students spearheaded protests against this system, arguing that it was discriminatory and hindered merit-based employment opportunities.



Source: Al Jazeera

The protests rapidly escalated into a broader movement against the government's perceived authoritarian tendencies. The government's response included internet blackouts and violent crackdowns on protestors, which only fueled further unrest. These events unfolded against a backdrop of economic challenges, including high unemployment rates among youth and widespread corruption allegations. The combination of these factors created a volatile environment that culminated in the 2024 revolution, ultimately leading to Prime Minister Hasina's resignation.

³ Wong, Anbarasan Ethirajan and Tessa. "Sheikh Hasina: Bangladesh's Pro-democracy Icon Who Became an Autocrat," August 6, 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cg3ee303yxpo>.

The CNN Effect in Bangladesh's Revolution

The CNN effect is a term used to describe the influence of real-time, global news coverage on the decision-making processes of governments and international organizations. It suggests that extensive media coverage can pressure policymakers to act swiftly in response to unfolding events, particularly in humanitarian crises or political conflicts. This phenomenon was first observed during the Gulf War in the early 1990s, where 24-hour news networks like CNN provided continuous coverage that influenced public opinion and political decisions. The CNN effect theory



is assumed to have two characteristics: (i) The news media is independent and has the power to set its own agenda, and (ii) it can provoke responses from policymakers.⁴

In the context of Bangladesh's 2024 revolution, the CNN effect played a significant role in shaping both domestic and international responses. As protests against the government's job quota system escalated, media coverage—both local and international—brought global attention to the situation. Reports of violent crackdowns by security forces, widespread arrests, and internet shutdowns were broadcast worldwide, highlighting the government's authoritarian measures. This real-time coverage not only amplified the voices of protestors but also increased pressure on the Bangladeshi government to address their demands.

⁴ Al Jazeera Media Institute. "What Is the CNN Effect and Why Is It Relevant Today?," n.d. <https://institute.aljazeera.net/en/ajr/article/1365>.

Analysis of Real-Time Media Coverage Impact

- **Public Opinion:**

Extensive media coverage galvanized public support for the protestors, both within Bangladesh and internationally. The portrayal of government crackdowns as oppressive fueled sympathy for the movement.

Social media platforms played a crucial role in disseminating information quickly, allowing protestors to organize and coordinate efforts despite government-imposed communication blackouts.

- **Policy Decisions:**

The global spotlight on Bangladesh's internal strife pressured the government to reconsider its stance on the job quota system. The Supreme Court eventually reduced the quotas significantly, a move seen as a direct response to both domestic unrest and international scrutiny.⁵



Source: People's Dispatch

⁵ Jazeera, Al. "Bangladesh Top Court Scraps Most Quotas That Caused Deadly Unrest." *Al Jazeera*, July 21, 2024. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/7/21/bangladesh-court-scraps-most-job-quotas-that-caused-deadly-unrest-reports>.

International condemnation of human rights abuses reported by media outlets led to calls for accountability from global organizations and foreign governments, further influencing policy changes within Bangladesh.

- **International Reactions:**

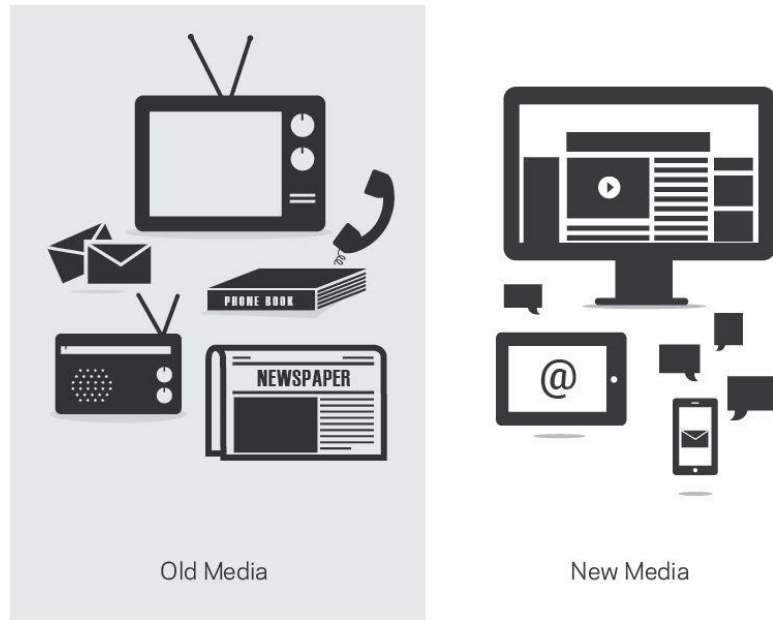
The widespread media coverage prompted reactions from international human rights organizations and foreign governments, which condemned the violence and urged for peaceful resolutions. This external pressure added another layer of complexity to the government's handling of the protests.

The CNN effect during Bangladesh's 2024 revolution illustrates how powerful real-time media coverage can be in influencing both public perception and political actions. It underscores the growing importance of media in shaping modern political landscapes.

Media Symbiosis: Traditional vs. New Media

The interaction between television networks and social media platforms played a critical role during Bangladesh's 2024 revolution, demonstrating a complex symbiosis that significantly influenced the flow of information and public mobilization. Television networks, traditionally seen as authoritative sources of news, provided structured and comprehensive coverage of the protests. However, their reach was often limited by government-imposed restrictions, such as the blackout of TV broadcasts during peak protest periods. In contrast, social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter offered real-time updates and a platform for citizen journalism, allowing protestors to share firsthand accounts and organize swiftly despite attempts by authorities to curb their influence.

The synergy between these two media forms created a dynamic information ecosystem. While television networks delivered in-depth analysis and broader context to the unfolding events, social media platforms facilitated rapid dissemination of information, enabling instantaneous communication among protestors and supporters. This interaction was particularly evident when traditional media outlets reported on events captured and initially shared on social media, thereby amplifying their reach and impact. The viral spread of images and videos depicting government crackdowns on protestors, for instance, fueled public outrage and drew international attention to the movement.



Source: Pinterest

This symbiotic relationship had profound implications for information dissemination and mobilization efforts. Social media's immediacy allowed protestors to coordinate actions quickly, bypassing traditional communication barriers imposed by the government. Platforms like Facebook became essential tools for organizing demonstrations, sharing safety information, and rallying support both domestically and internationally. Meanwhile, the credibility of traditional media lent legitimacy to these grassroots narratives when they were picked up and broadcasted to a wider audience. This dual-channel approach not only sustained the momentum of the protests but also ensured that the movement's message reached diverse audiences across different media landscapes.

The 2024 revolution in Bangladesh highlights the powerful interplay between traditional and new media in shaping political movements. It underscores the necessity for both forms to coexist, leveraging their respective strengths to inform, engage, and mobilize citizens in an increasingly digital world.

Case Studies

During Bangladesh's 2024 revolution, media coverage played a critical role in shaping events and influencing both public perception and policy responses. Several key instances highlight the

significant impact of media during this period, illustrating the complex interplay between reporting and political dynamics.

One of the most pivotal moments was the coverage of Abu Sayeed's death, a student protest leader at Rangpur Begum Rokeya University. On July 16, 2024, Sayeed was shot dead while peacefully protesting, an event that was captured on video and widely disseminated through both traditional news outlets and social media platforms.⁶ This footage became emblematic of the government's brutal crackdown on protestors and sparked widespread outrage across the nation. The incident drew parallels to historical acts of resistance, such as Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation in Tunisia, which ignited the Arab Spring.⁷ The extensive media coverage of Sayeed's death galvanized public support for the protests and intensified calls for Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's resignation.

1. **Impact of Media Coverage:**

The graphic footage of Sayeed's death broadcasted on television and shared on social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter amplified public anger and mobilized further protests across Bangladesh.

International news outlets picked up the story, leading to global condemnation of the Bangladeshi government's actions and increasing pressure on Hasina to address the demands of the protestors.

⁶TBS Report. "How Abu Sayeed Was Shot and Killed in Rangpur During Clash Between Police and Protesters." *The Business Standard*, July 17, 2024. <https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/how-abu-sayeed-was-shot-and-killed-rangpur-during-clash-between-police-and-protesters>.

⁷"2011 - 2020 | Laureates | Sakharov Prize | European Parliament," n.d. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/sakharovprize/en/mohamed-bouazizi-2011-arab-spring-tunisi/products-details/20200331CAN54202>.



Source: Pinterest

Another significant instance was the "Bangla Blockade" initiated by student protestors on July 7, which effectively brought the country to a standstill. This protest tactic involved road and railway blockades that were extensively covered by both national and international media. The blockade demonstrated the organizational capabilities of the Gen-Z protestors and highlighted their grievances against systemic corruption and nepotism within government job allocations. Media coverage played a crucial role in keeping the public informed about the scale and impact of these blockades, further legitimizing the protestors' cause.

2. **Media's Role in Mobilization:**

Continuous updates from journalists on the ground provided real-time information to citizens, enabling coordinated efforts to sustain the blockade despite government attempts to suppress communication through internet shutdowns.

The blockade's success in disrupting daily life underscored the protestors' determination and drew attention to their demands for systemic reforms.

The government's response to these protests included severe measures such as internet blackouts and violent crackdowns by security forces, which were also extensively covered by media outlets. Reports from organizations like Amnesty International documented human rights abuses, including arbitrary arrests and excessive use of force against protestors.⁸ This coverage not only

⁸Amnesty International. "What Is Happening at the Quota-reform Protests in Bangladesh?," August 2, 2024. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/07/what-is-happening-at-the-quota-reform-protests-in-bangladesh/>.

highlighted the repressive tactics employed by authorities but also fueled international advocacy for accountability and justice.⁹



Source: Threads/AFP

3. International Media Influence:

The global dissemination of reports detailing government repression contributed to mounting international pressure on Bangladesh to uphold human rights standards.

Coverage by international media outlets like CNN provided a platform for protestors' voices to be heard beyond national borders, increasing global awareness of their plight.

Challenges and Ethical Considerations

Journalists covering sensitive political events in Bangladesh, such as the 2024 revolution, face numerous challenges. One of the most significant obstacles is the threat of violence and harassment. According to reports, journalists have been subjected to intimidation, arbitrary arrests, and even physical assaults by both government forces and political activists. The Digital Security Act (DSA) has been a tool for silencing dissent, with many journalists being charged under this

⁹Al Jazeera, “Bangladesh Minister Defends Gov’t Response to Protests Amid Calls for Probe,” *Al Jazeera*, July 25, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/7/25/bangladesh-minister-defends-govt-response-to-protests-amid-calls-for-probe>.

law for their critical reporting.¹⁰ The environment of fear created by these actions has led to self-censorship among media professionals, as they navigate the risks associated with reporting on government actions and opposition movements.

Ethical considerations are paramount for media outlets during times of political unrest. Journalists must balance the need to report truthfully and accurately with the potential consequences of their reporting. This includes verifying information amidst a flood of misinformation and disinformation, which can exacerbate tensions and lead to further unrest. Media outlets must also consider the impact of their coverage on public perception and ensure that their reporting does not inadvertently incite violence or panic. The responsibility to provide balanced and fair coverage is crucial in maintaining journalistic integrity and public trust.



Source: Threads/AFP

¹⁰Al Jazeera Media Institute. “Bangladesh’s Digital Security Act Is Criminalising Journalism,” n.d. <https://institute.aljazeera.net/en/ajr/article/1872>.

Recommendations for Media and Policymakers

To ensure responsible media coverage during political movements, several strategies can be adopted:

- i. **Training and Support:** Media organizations should provide training for journalists on digital security and personal safety to protect them from harassment and violence. This includes using encrypted communication tools and understanding how to report safely in volatile environments.
- ii. **Fact-Checking Initiatives:** Establishing dedicated fact-checking teams can help combat misinformation. These teams can verify information before it is published, reducing the spread of false narratives that could inflame tensions.
- iii. **Editorial Independence:** Media outlets should strive to maintain editorial independence from political or corporate influences. This can be achieved by implementing policies that separate business interests from editorial decisions, ensuring that reporting remains unbiased and focused on truth.

For policymakers, engaging effectively with media involves:

- i. **Transparent Communication:** Governments should prioritize transparent communication with the press to build trust and reduce speculation. Regular press briefings and open access to information can help achieve this goal.
- ii. **Legal Reforms:** Reforming laws like the Digital Security Act to protect freedom of speech while addressing genuine security concerns is essential. This would create a safer environment for journalists to operate without fear of retribution.
- iii. **Collaboration with Media:** Policymakers should collaborate with media professionals to develop guidelines that promote ethical reporting during crises. This partnership can help ensure that coverage is both responsible and informative, contributing positively to public discourse.

By implementing such strategies, both media organizations and policymakers can contribute to a more informed and stable society during times of political change.

Conclusion

The 2024 Monsoon Revolution in Bangladesh underscores the powerful role of media in shaping political movements. Key findings reveal that both traditional and new media significantly influenced public opinion, policy decisions, and mobilization efforts. The CNN effect highlighted how real-time global coverage pressured the government to respond, while the synergy between television and social media facilitated rapid information dissemination.

Challenges faced by journalists, such as threats and censorship under laws like the Digital Security Act, emphasize the need for press freedom and ethical reporting standards. These experiences highlight the importance of legal reforms to protect journalists and ensure accurate coverage.

Looking forward, the implications for future political movements are profound. As digital platforms continue to evolve, their role in activism will expand, offering new opportunities for engagement but also presenting challenges related to misinformation. Ensuring responsible media operations will be crucial for maintaining democratic principles and fostering informed public discourse. For activists, leveraging media strategically can amplify their voices and build broader coalitions for change, while governments must recognize media's role in promoting transparency and accountability.